

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Merrybrook

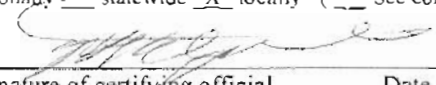
other names/site number Brookside; Laura Ratcliffe/Hanna House; VDHR #029-0245 and 44FX0903

### 2. Location

Street & number 2346 Centreville Road not for publication ☐  
city or town Herndon vicinity ☒  
state Virginia code VA county Fairfax code 059 Zip 20171

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this ☒ nomination ☐ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ☒ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ☐ nationally ☐ statewide ☒ locally ( ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

  
Signature of certifying official \_\_\_\_\_ Date 3/7/77  
Virginia Department of Historic Resources  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria ( ☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments )

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

### 4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

☐ entered in the National Register

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the National Register

☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the National Register

☐ removed from the National Register

☐ other (explain): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Keeper \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Action \_\_\_\_\_

(Rev. 10-90)

U. S. Department of the Interior  
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☒ private  
☐ public-local  
☐ public-State  
☐ public-Federal

**Category of Property** (Check only one box)

☒ building(s)  
☐ district  
☐ site  
☐ structure  
☐ object

**Number of Resources within Property**

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>4</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>5</u>	<u>1</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/AName of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) N/A**6. Function or Use****Historic Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>DOMESTIC</u>	Sub: <u>Single Dwelling</u>
<u>DOMESTIC</u>	<u>Secondary Structure: servant's quarters</u>
<u>AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE</u>	<u>Animal Facility: chicken house</u>
<u>AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE</u>	<u>Agricultural Outbuilding: barn; wellhouse</u>

**Current Functions** (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>DOMESTIC</u>	Sub: <u>Single Dwelling</u>
<u>DOMESTIC</u>	<u>Secondary Structure: storage shed</u>
<u>AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE</u>	<u>Agricultural Outbuilding: tool shed; barn</u>
<u>AGRICULTURE/SUBSISTENCE</u>	<u>Agricultural Outbuilding: wellhouse</u>
<u>RECREATION and CULTURE</u>	<u>Sports Facility: swimming pool</u>

**7. Description****Architectural Classification** (Enter categories from instructions)

EARLY REPUBLIC; MID-19<sup>th</sup> CENTURY: Greek Revival;  
LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY AND 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY REVIVALS: Colonial Revival

**Materials** (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation STONE: Fieldstone; BRICK  
 roof METAL: Tin  
 walls WOOD: Weatherboard  
 other BRICK - Chimneys

**Narrative Description** (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**8. Statement of Significance**

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**Applicable National Register Criteria** (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☐ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☒ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria Considerations** (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

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**Areas of Significance** (Enter categories from instructions) ARCHITECTURE; MILITARY**Period of Significance** circa 1820 – circa 1950**Significant Dates** circa 1820; circa 1850; circa 1869; circa 1880-1890; 1923; circa 1950**Significant Person** (Complete if Criterion B is marked above) LAURA RATCLIFFE**Cultural Affiliation** N/A**Architect/Builder** UNKNOWN**Narrative Statement of Significance** (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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**Bibliography**

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file** (NPS)

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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**SUMMARY DESCRIPTION**

Merrybrook, formerly known as Brookside, is a well-preserved house located on a beautiful landscape of approximately 1 acre, fronting on Centreville Road, just south of Herndon, in Fairfax County, Virginia. Set upon a gentle rise at the northeast corner of the property, the house overlooks a meandering, perennial stream, the source of its name. The property is well-wooded with majestic twin oaks and maples, evergreens and many other varieties of trees and plantings. The frame house, clad in weatherboard and topped with a standing-seam metal gabled roof, has evolved over nearly two centuries and telescopes from a one-and-one-half to two-story sections dating from circa 1820, circa 1850, circa 1880-1890, and circa 1950. Influences of the Early Republic, Greek Revival, and late-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century revival styles are evidenced on the exterior and interior of the house. The extant porches on the facade and the north and west elevations of the house date to the early twentieth century.

From the house, the land slopes gently down to a four-stall, frame barn, a contributing resource, built circa 1920. The barn is topped by a cupola bearing the name of its manufacturer, the Loudon Machinery Company of Fairfield, Iowa, also believed to have designed the barn. Additional contributing buildings include two late-19<sup>th</sup>-century frame sheds, one formerly used as a chicken house and the other possibly as a servant's quarters. A stone-lined cooling well, a contributing structure located north of the house, believed to have been built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century, is topped by wooden well housing probably constructed in the early twentieth century. A swimming pool, a non-contributing structure, is located southwest of the house.

**DETAILED DESCRIPTION**

Merrybrook<sup>1</sup>, known as Brookside in earlier years<sup>2</sup>, is a significant property fronting along Centreville Road in Fairfax County, Virginia, that includes an evolved farmhouse built in at least five different periods from circa 1820 to circa 1950. The house and related outbuildings form a complex that gives a glimpse of domestic and agricultural life in Fairfax County during the past two hundred years.

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**Overall Appearance and Sections**

The house itself is a one-and-a-half-to-two-story frame farmhouse with several additions. The house has evolved over nearly two hundred years and presents a harmonious transition, the result of apparent efforts to maintain the proportions and feel of the earliest section. Although changes have occurred to the house over time, much of the original fabric is still intact and retains its character through the different periods of its history. Painted white with dark green wooden shutters, the house is topped by a standing-seam metal gabled roof painted red.

The oldest section extant, believed to have been constructed circa 1820, is a one-and-a-half-story, two-bay, side-gabled frame section clad in weatherboard which rests on a fieldstone foundation. Most of the windows of this section are six-over-six, double-hung, wood-sash windows. Fixed six-light wood sashes exist on the upper level of the facade. Perhaps an earlier section, a small one-story, one-room shed-like construction, is clearly visible in a circa 1880 photograph. No longer extant, this building was replaced by a side porch with a metal shed roof most likely added in the late 19<sup>th</sup> or the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second section of the house was built in the Greek Revival style, circa 1850, as a two-story, three-bay, one-pile, side-gabled, log framed addition. It also sits on a fieldstone foundation and is clad in weatherboard with wooden shutters. The front early-20<sup>th</sup>-century entrance door has four raised panels, topped by a four-light transom, and is sheltered by a one-story, one-bay porch on square posts. The two-over-two, double-hung, wood-sash windows of this section suggest that the windows were replaced in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps in the 1870s as the two-over-two sashes were in place when the circa 1880 photograph was taken. The frieze along the roofline appears to have been altered to accommodate larger windows. The cornerboards have decorative capitals. The late-20<sup>th</sup>-century chimney took the place of a bay window that had been placed in the southwest elevation by circa 1880.

The circa 1820 and circa 1850 sections of the house have large partially-hewn log floor joists and are also supported by at least six parged brick supports beneath.

An addition was added to the west of the circa 1850s section in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The circa 1880-1890 two-story addition is balloon framed clad in weatherboard built on a stone foundation and is topped by a gabled, standing-seam metal roof. The windows of this section are

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two-over-two, double-hung, wood-sash windows. The kitchen section, believed to have been added during the same period, is one-story with a shallow attic and has six-over-six, double-hung, wood-sash windows. There are two shed-roofed additions also added to the rear of the house believed to have been built in late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. One of these had toilet facilities at one time and is now used as a room for mechanical equipment, which can only be accessed from the outside. The other addition, located to the rear of the kitchen, is now used as a laundry and was formed from the exterior walls of the kitchen and the extended hall of the circa 1880-1890 section. A small screened porch with a shed roof extends from the center hall rear door approximately five feet.

A two-story addition was added to the house in the Colonial Revival style circa 1950. Resting on a brick foundation, this three-bay, side-gabled section with deep cornice returns, includes several windows of different sizes on the facade. The first level includes a tripartite window with double-hung, wood-sash windows including a central section with a sixteen-light fixed sash flanked by double-hung windows with four-over-four lights. A small two-over-two, double-hung, wood-sash window also exists on the first level. The second level has two large double-hung, wood-sash windows with two-over-two lights and a smaller double-hung, wood-sash window with two-over-two lights matching the one below it. A screened-in porch topped by a wooden balustrade is located at the southernmost end of this section.

### **Interior Description**

The architectural elements of the interior from the different periods of construction are still quite visible and many of the original materials are still intact. Doors with original hardware, window and door surrounds, floor moldings, tongue-and-groove paneling, pine flooring, and many of the windows still retain their integrity and well represent the evolution of the farmhouse over time.

#### **Circa 1820 Section**

The earliest existing part of the house is the present dining room--a large, square room with a low seven-foot-tall ceiling and two small double-hung, wood-sash windows with six-over-six lights, one that appears to retain the original glass. A door opening exists very close to the northeast corner of the room's north wall. This unusual location for a door may be explained by the need

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to access the previously mentioned pre-existing building. There is also a small section of in-fill flooring, the size of a single flue, against the north wall, which is believed to be the location of an earlier chimney connected to the pre-existing building.<sup>3</sup>

On the south wall of the dining room is a boxed staircase enclosed by wide, beaded, tongue-and-groove pine planks. These stairs lead to a single bedroom above, the same dimensions as the dining room below. The ceiling of the half-story measures seven feet and eight inches high and slopes with the angle of the steeply pitched roof. The attic above the flat portion of the bedroom ceiling contains sash-sawn rafters, joined at the apex with no ridge board, and other framing elements characteristic of about 1820. A small door on the west side of the room leads to a two-part attic over the kitchen and laundry where a mixture of framing techniques was observed including some hewn framing members.

Circa 1850 Section

The heavy front door opens into a long central hall with high ceilings, measuring eight-and-a-half-feet tall, and a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century walnut staircase with turned balusters and a heavy newel. This section, built in the Greek Revival style and framed in logs, was constructed with a side-passage plan, which became the house's central hall. The newel and railing may be a replacement from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when heavier moldings took the place of the earlier slender Greek Revival ones. Along the south wall of the central hall, two raised four-panel wooden doors with original hardware lead into the present living room. Another door is located at the rear of the hall, part of the circa 1880-1890 addition. It provides cross ventilation as well as easier access from the gardens and fields behind. The front section of the hall has four-inch-wide pine floor boards running east to west while the rear section, added about thirty years later, has floor boards running north-to-south, indicative of the later construction of the balloon-framed back half of this section of the house.

The bedroom above the living room has exposed log ceiling joists, revealed when the repairs were made to a leaking roof in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Log rafters are still present in the attic.

Kitchen Section

The one-story kitchen addition at the rear northeast corner of the house is believed to have been added in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The north door of the dining room leads into the



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present-day kitchen which has a bowed wood frame ceiling.<sup>4</sup> The kitchen was added some years after the dining room, but apparently was in use by the time Civil War heroine Laura Ratcliffe lived in the house.<sup>5</sup> Remains of an earlier stovepipe flue are evident in this room as well as an additional rear entrance, now bricked up, leading into the laundry. Another room behind the kitchen now serves as the mechanical room, housing the heating and cooling equipment for the house. This room is believed to have served as a servant's quarters at one time. Above the kitchen is a shallow attic with a small fixed window with a single light. The main kitchen door leads to a side porch on the east side.

Circa 1880-1890 Section

The two-story balloon-framed addition constructed west of the 1850 section in circa 1880-1890, was created to provide additional living space on the first level with another bedroom above. The west wall of the first-floor front room of the circa 1850 section was removed circa 1950 to create one large living room.

Circa 1950 Section

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century living room, a modern pine door opens into a small knotty-pine paneled den or family room. The beaded tongue-and-groove paneling clearly reflects the trends of the 1940s and 1950s. A bedroom and bath are to the east of the den, and a small kitchen is at its south end. A large screened porch attached to the west end of this section overlooks the pool, a non-contributing structure, and the barn at the southern edge of the property.

As Merrybrook has evolved over time, the many owners and tenants have provided a strong continuum in their respectful treatment of the original buildings and grounds. Thanks to this continued care, the overall integrity of the house and setting has been well preserved for almost 200 years.

**SECONDARY RESOURCES**

There are three outbuildings and one structure at Merrybrook which contribute to its significance—a former chicken house, now used as a storage shed/garage; a tool shed, possibly used as a servant's quarters; an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century barn; and a wellhouse. One non-contributing structure exists as well – a late-20<sup>th</sup>-century swimming pool.

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**Barn**

Built circa 1920, a four-stall frame barn, a contributing resource, clad in horizontal boards and painted white with wooden shutters painted green, is located about 75 feet south of the main house. The gable-roofed building, topped with asphalt shingles and a centrally placed cupola, has stalls which open onto a paddock and have access to the nearby stream. The cupola is a sheet metal ventilator with the name Loudon on the north side. The Loudon Machinery Company of Fairfield, Iowa, manufactured the ventilators and many other agricultural implements from the 1880s through the 1950s, as well as provided designs for barns. The barn at Merrybrook is believed to be a product of the company's design,<sup>6</sup> and it retains exceptional integrity of form and materials on the exterior and interior.

**Chicken House/Storage Shed**

Located to the northwest of the main house is a large, one-story, board-and-batten, rectangular shed, a contributing resource, with an earthen floor now used for storage, but it formerly served as a chicken house. The late-19<sup>th</sup>- to early-20<sup>th</sup>-century frame building is clad in weatherboard and topped by a standing-seam, metal gabled roof.

**Servant's Quarters/Tool Shed**

Also to the northwest of the main house is a small frame tool shed, a contributing resource believed to have been built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, clad in roughly cut weatherboard and topped by a tin gabled roof. On the interior, a stovepipe hole pierced in its wooden ceiling provides evidence that the building was once heated and possibly served as a servant's quarters. There is also a simple wooden lock which can only be used from the inside.

**Well Housing**

Located north of the main house is a stone-lined cooling well, probably built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and topped with wooden well housing, believed to have been built in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and modeled in a traditional style with a metal terne roof. The stone-lined cooling well still holds very cold water and was once used for keeping milk and possibly other dairy products fresh.<sup>7</sup> In a small adjacent pit there is also an old jack-pump, apparently once used for drawing water from this well.

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**Landscape**

The landscape of Merrybrook remains an island of tranquility amid the rapid development of Centreville Road and the western part of Fairfax County in general. Both ends of the long driveway are shaded by a mixture of large evergreen and deciduous trees, supplemented by old fashioned shrubs and flowers such as Japonica, mock orange, boxwood, peony and iris. The boxwood deserve special mention since oral history suggests that they were planted by Laura Ratcliffe herself; they are over twenty feet tall. The placement of the house at one end of the present property allows for sweeping views to the south which include 200-year-old maples, gigantic hollies, colorful Japanese maples, and a variety of fruit trees.

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**ENDNOTES**

1. The name Merrybrook was given to the property by the Davises who owned the property from 1948 to 1971. It is the name of the stream that flows in front of the house, a branch of Horsepen Run.
2. Although it is not known exactly when the property came to be known as Brookside, it was referred to by that name when Jeanne Rust wrote "Portrait of Laura" for *Virginia Calvacade* in 1962.
3. Terry Necciai, *The Laura Ratcliffe House Historical and Architectural Evaluation*, prepared for the Ruth C. Launders Marital Trust, June 2006, 10.
4. *Northern Virginia Daily*, "Shenandoah River Boats...", [ 2002].
5. Interviews with Mrs. Mabel Newman and Mrs. Gladys Utterback who visited Miss Laura many times in the 1920s, by Mrs. Winifred Meiselman, 1984.
6. Necciai, 33.
7. Ibid., 35.

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**STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

Fronting along Centreville Road in Fairfax County, Virginia, on approximately 1 acre of land, Merrybrook is a significant landmark that is one of the last surviving early-19<sup>th</sup>-century properties in the area. The main house and outbuildings sit on a picturesque landscape among stately oaks, maples, and evergreens with a brook meandering through the property. Formerly known as Brookside, the house is architecturally significant as an evolved farmhouse, built in at least five periods from circa 1820 to circa 1950. Architectural elements can be traced throughout the house illustrating the Early Republic, Greek Revival, and late-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century styles. Secondary resources on the property include three contributing buildings: an early-20<sup>th</sup>-century frame barn and two contributing frame sheds, built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A stone lined cooling well, a contributing structure, is located to the north of the main house, and is topped by wooden well housing constructed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The only non-contributing resource on the property is a late-20<sup>th</sup>-century swimming pool located to the southwest of the house.

Merrybrook is also significant as the residence of well-known Civil War heroine Laura Ratcliffe from circa 1869, when her mother bought the property, until her death in 1923. The dwelling is believed to be the only remaining house associated with her life. Well known for her gallant efforts in saving Colonel John S. Mosby's life during the Civil War, Laura became a legend in her own time. Mosby made mention of her in his book written after the Civil War and credited her with saving his life. Laura's bravery and devotion to the southern cause, along with her beauty and tenderness, inspired General J. E. B. Stuart to write a poem about her, which he gave to her in an inscribed album. Her staunch, principled, and generous character continued to shine after the war as she resided for over fifty years at Merrybrook, which stands today as a testament to this heroic figure.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Originally built as a small homestead on a large tract that became part of the extensive land holdings of the Coleman family during the early 19th century,<sup>1</sup> Merrybrook, formerly known as Brookside, survives as a remnant to earlier periods of Fairfax County's history that are quickly vanishing from the landscape. Located a short distance south of present-day Herndon on Centreville Road, Merrybrook is one of the few remaining early permanent houses in the area.

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In 1869, Laura Ratcliffe's mother, Ann M. Ratcliffe purchased from Richard and Ann Maria Ratcliffe Coleman (Laura's sister), 13  $\frac{3}{4}$  acres of land described in the deed as "adjoining the lands of Seabold on the South, on the North and West by the heirs of John Hanna, on the East by the County Road leading from Frying Pan to Herndon it being the lot of land formerly belonging to Dr. Richard Coleman and which was purchased by the said Richard Coleman from the heirs of the said Richard and of Burr Gould and wife."<sup>2</sup> The adjacent Hanna property consisted of two farms totaling 570  $\frac{1}{2}$  acres that they had purchased the previous year.<sup>3</sup> They had apparently been living on the farm that comprised the northern half of this acreage prior to 1868, but patriarch John Hanna died before the deed could be recorded.<sup>4</sup> The 300  $\frac{1}{2}$ -acre Hanna tract, the southern half of the Hanna acreage, was immediately west of the house that Ann Ratcliffe purchased in 1869, now known as Merrybrook. When Ann McCarty Lee Ratcliffe died in 1878, her daughters Cora and Laura inherited this property.<sup>5</sup> The 1878 Hopkins map shows M. Hanna living between Jno Hanna, his brother, to the north and Mrs. Ratcliffe to the south.<sup>6</sup> The circa 1880-1890 addition to Merrybrook was probably directly related to Milton Hanna's marriage to Laura Ratcliffe in 1890.<sup>7</sup>

Upon Laura's death in 1923,<sup>8</sup> the property was willed to her cousin, Mamie C. Wiley. Laura owned three houses when she died. She disposed of them as follows; "... house and farm given to me by my late husband Milton Hanna to my cousin Nellie L. Nevitt. I wish her to live on the farm and always keep it in the family if possible. I give the house I now occupy, given me by my mother, to my cousin Mamie C. Wiley, hoping that she will make it her home. To my two cousins Mary Lee Bennett and Nellie Bennett my farm known as the Coleman farm (one hundred and eighty eight acres on the east side of Centreville Road) with the wish they keep it in the family."<sup>9</sup> Of those three houses, Merrybrook, the house given to her by her mother, is the only one still standing. The Coleman farm was located on a site now occupied by a large retail, hotel, and office complex known as "Worldgate". The Ratcliffe-Coleman-Hanna cemetery, where Laura is buried, is also on that property. Milton Hanna's farm was probably northwest of Merrybrook. The property changed hands many times from 1924 to 1971 through a sequence of owners that includes the following names: Fleming, Wiley, Utterback, Wales, Caldwell, Chamberlain, Lowe, and Davis.<sup>10</sup> Since 1971, the present owners of Merrybrook, David and Winifred Meiselman, have resided at the residence.<sup>11</sup>

Merrybrook is architecturally significant as an evolved farmhouse built in at least five periods

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that has retained much of the fabric and architectural elements from each of the periods that it  
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represents. Although changes have occurred over time, the form and architectural details from Early Republic, to Greek Revival, and the late-19<sup>th</sup>- and early-20<sup>th</sup>-century styles can be seen throughout the house on the exterior and interior. From the exterior details of the window and door architraves, the cornerboards with capitals, the moldings around the roofline, and the deep cornice returns, to the interior doors, trim work, pine floors, and fine staircases, excellent craftsmanship is evidenced in each room of the house.

The landscape of Merrybrook has retained its agricultural setting, a rarity for this area of Fairfax County which is highly developed. The significant barn and two contributing sheds from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20 centuries, along with the stone-lined well with well housing, stand as remnants of the past. The beauty of the property is enhanced by the majestic trees, giant boxwoods, and other plantings fronted by a brook.

**Laura Ratcliffe**

Merrybrook represents the life of renowned local Civil War heroine Laura Ratcliffe. The house, formerly known as Brookside, is thought to be the only remaining house closely associated with her life. Laura was born in 1836 to Francis Fitzhugh and Anna McCarty Lee Ratcliffe.<sup>12</sup> After her father's death, about 1845<sup>13</sup>, she and her mother and two sisters moved to the Frying Pan community, later named Floris, in Fairfax County, where large farms dotted the landscape.<sup>14</sup> The 1870 census shows Laura, her mother, and her sister Cora living together in the Floris area. By 1880, Ann Ratcliffe had died, so Laura and Cora lived together. Given the neighboring families in the 1870 and 1880 censuses, they probably resided at Merrybrook at that time.<sup>15</sup>

Ann Ratcliffe and her daughters' decision to move to the Frying Pan area was apparently due to the numerous relatives the family had in that vicinity. Three of Laura's grandfather's siblings had married three of the children of Dr. Richard Coleman, a representative of one of the original eighteenth-century families of the Herndon area.<sup>16</sup> In the decades prior to his death in 1829, Dr. Coleman had amassed a large amount of contiguous farm acreage in the area between Frying Pan and Herndon. His property had included nearly all of the land immediately north, south, and east of the Laura Ratcliffe House (the only adjoining land he did not own was the 300 ½-acre tract west of Merrybrook, acquired in 1868 from Sally Bronaugh of Leesburg, who had purchased it about 1830).<sup>17</sup> After Dr. Coleman's death, the land was divided among his

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children, including two sons and a daughter, who were, by marriage, Laura's great uncles and  
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great aunt. About the time that Laura's father died and the family moved to Frying Pan, Laura's oldest sister, Ann Maria, married Richard Coleman, a first cousin. Richard Coleman was a son of Richard J. Coleman, who was a son of Dr. Richard Coleman. Although Dr. Coleman's land was divided among the families of his descendants, several of the heirs died or moved away by the 1840s, leaving Laura's brother-in-law and his siblings as the last representatives of a large family.<sup>18</sup> Richard Coleman, Laura's brother-in-law, gradually bought the interests of other heirs, to retain the Coleman family homestead (the Worldgate site). In the process, several of the surrounding tracts of Coleman land were sold to the Gould, Raub, and Hanna families.

The sale of Merrybrook to Laura's mother in 1869 appears to have occurred so that Laura, her mother, and her sister Cora, who was ill at the time, could live near Richard and Ann Maria Ratcliffe Coleman. The 1869 sale included a ¾-acre triangle of land, originally part of a farm the Coleman family had sold to the Gould family.<sup>19</sup> It also included about 13 acres, also property that once belonged to Dr. Richard Coleman, that the grandson, Richard Coleman, had acquired through other means. The 13-acre tract was near the center of an eighteenth-century farm of about 150 acres whose boundaries had disappeared by the mid-nineteenth century as a result of numerous land transfers.<sup>20</sup> The use or ownership of the house prior to 1869 is not clear, in part because some court records from the period are missing. However, the construction of the house reflects at least two or three different generations of building materials and techniques (such as half-hewn log framing in one section and sash sawn framing in another) that are not typically found after the 1840s.

The Civil War brought many changes to the area. By the time the war began, Laura was twenty-five, and had grown into a "beautiful young lady – capable and loyal. . . Her dark eyes, jet black hair, and handsome face and figure made a striking appearance as she rode about the farm, helping her mother oversee the work and responsibilities."<sup>21</sup> Through both sides of her family, Laura Ratcliffe was related to many Virginians who served in the early days of the Confederacy.

Thus, when the war started, it was natural for her to feel especially concerned about the conflict, and eager to do what she could to help her relatives and friends. In fact, her own brother, John, was a Confederate soldier, who died in 1864 in a Confederate hospital as a result of the war. Laura Ratcliffe's strong family ties to numerous families living on surrounding properties helped make her activities as a spy possible. She not only saved the life of the feared Southern partisan



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John S. Mosby, but continued her work throughout the war at great cost to herself. Her role in history is established by several memoirs, both southern and northern, recalling her exploits.<sup>22</sup>

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**John Mosby and Laura Ratcliffe**

The Confederacy boasted many forceful and ingenious fighters. One of the most unusual and effective was Colonel John Singleton Mosby, who commanded a group of Rangers (43d Battalion, Virginia Cavalry) outside of the usual military pattern. They were known as “irregulars” at that time, but today we might call them guerillas. Though their numbers were few, they succeeded in making many daring raids against the numerically superior Union forces.

In great part this was due to Colonel Mosby’s intelligence, tactical skill, and consummate bravery. Because of his many unexpected raids on key Union elements and resources, he kept a disproportionately large number of Union troops engaged in pursuing and waiting for him rather than in the battlefields where they might have been used to more effect.<sup>23</sup>

Naturally, Mosby was the target of many Union attempts to capture him, but he had eluded their plans so many times that he became known as “The Grey Ghost”. However, only a few weeks after she was introduced to Mosby by General J. E. B. Stuart, Laura Ratcliffe was to play a role in helping Mosby escape almost certain death from one of these attempts. She had already acquired a reputation as a “friend” and probable informant for Mosby, but because of her adroitness and intelligence, had never been caught. The incident is revealed in Major John Scott’s *Partisan Life with Colonel John S. Mosby*, written in 1867, that on a cold, wet day, a Union soldier came to Laura’s door to buy supplies. While there he could not resist the temptation to brag to her that her friend, Mosby, would soon be no more. His troops were planning an ambush, which would certainly lead to his end. The soldier further bragged that he had no fear of telling her of these plans because the weather was so bad and the mud was so deep for any lady to get through to warn him. The moment he was out of sight, Laura and her sister set out as fast as possible towards their relative’s farm to ask him to intercept Mosby and steer him away from the danger ahead. But, as it happened, their paths crossed Mosby’s, and he was warned of the ensuing danger. In recalling the event, in his own words he said: “. . . I observed two ladies walking rapidly toward me. One was Miss Laura Ratcliffe. . . But for meeting them, my life as a Partisan would have ended that day.”<sup>24</sup>

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Activities During the War

Laura's first recorded activity during the Civil War was nursing wounded soldiers near J.E.B. Stuart's, Camp "Qui Vive". Stuart later wrote of the strong impression she made on him in a poem entitled "To Laura."<sup>25</sup>

*To Laura*

We met by chance; yet in that 'ventful chance  
The mystic web of destiny was woven:  
I saw thy beauteous image bending o'er  
The prostrate form of one that day had proven  
A hero fully nerved to deal  
To tyrant hordes – the south avenging steel.  
"Twas woman's cherished sphere. Thy self-devotion-  
Enchained my heart; were all as true as thou,  
This war were not, and peace were still our portion.  
I saw thee soothe the soldier's aching brow-  
And ardent wished his lot were mine—  
To be caressed (sic) with care like thine.

Fair Laura, (I flatter not,) – thy praise  
Is write in words which war's alarms  
Or time can ne'er from mem'ry efface  
Thy worth, thy modesty, not the least of charms—  
Will be the soul-inspiring theme  
To fill th'enraptured "*soldier's dream*"  
The past to one is precious; and to thee—  
I trust it is not all regret, but even  
In war's dread desolation there may be  
Some charmed remembrance to its havoc given  
Some long-cherished, ne'er forgotten token  
*One* friendship made ne'er to be broken.  
To Him omnipotent I leave thee now—  
Years, long years, out paths, may sever  
May grief o'er shadow ne'er my Laura's brow-  
And fortune smile upon thee ever.  
And when this page shall meet your glance  
Forget not him, you met by chance.

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March 3, 1862

J. E. B. ....

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Ratcliffe's assistance to Mosby, besides saving his life, included providing timely information on Union troop movements, hiding both men and money for him, and occasionally acting as "banker" for the Rangers. Till the end of the War, Laura worked in close cooperation with Mosby. He often used her home as his headquarters and would meet his men at a large rock outcropping nearby, later known as "Mosby's Rock". This was also apparently where Laura successfully hid several thousand dollars entrusted to her after the Rangers had liberated it from a Union train.<sup>26</sup>

The Virginia Department of Historic Resources approved an historical highway marker for Mosby's Rock in 2000 denoting its significance.

Laura was admired locally for her bravery and her beauty and was acknowledged by Stuart in many ways. He presented her with a gold-embossed brown leather album with the following inscription on the front page: "Presented to Miss Laura Ratcliffe by her soldier-friend as a token of his high appreciation of her patriotism, admiration of her virtues, and pledge of his lasting esteem." The album was signed not only by Stuart but also by many other soldiers who fought with him including Mosby and Brigadier General Fitzhugh Lee. Many of her local friends had also signed the book.<sup>27</sup> She quietly kept this memoir, as well as Stuart's gold watch chain, among her possessions at Merrybrook. These items were discovered in her effects after her death.

At the time of her activities in the war, Laura is believed to have lived with her mother and sister in a small house approximately one mile south of Merrybrook, which no longer exists.

### **After the War**

Through conversations with a few of those who knew her, a vivid picture emerges: that of a vigorous, intelligent woman who successfully managed her family's farms as well as her own holdings, while taking an active and generous part in her community. She was a faithful Episcopalian but did not limit her donations solely to her own church.<sup>28</sup> In fact, among her reputed interests in and donations to neighboring churches and neighbors, she donated an acre of land to help launch a fledgling Presbyterian church in 1906 with the only restriction being that the land should be used only for religious purposes or a school; otherwise the land reverted to the

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grantor.<sup>29</sup>

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The war brought hardships to many families. After the death of her sister Cora in 1880,<sup>30</sup> Laura married Milton Hanna in 1890. The marriage was cut short by his death from an accident seven years later. However, Laura continued her management and other activities, with the added proviso that no animal that had been alive while her husband had lived on the farm should be killed. Stories were still told in the 1970s about the old horses and other farm animals who lived on under “Miss Laura’s” protection.<sup>31</sup> Disabled by a severe hip injury in her seventy-eighth year, she remained an invalid until her death. In those years her story and her character drew neighbors to her and she was regarded as a local legend. When she died, her open casket was placed by the two large windows at the front of the house so that people could view her remains and pay their respects. Laura Ratcliffe is buried in a family cemetery across Centreville Road not far from Merrybrook. An historical highway marker is being considered by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources to recognize her grave site.

Laura Ratcliffe, like many other women spies during the Civil War, braved imprisonment, danger and sometimes their lives in their efforts to defend their causes and their homes. By doing so, she became a legend in her own time, and a heroic figure for the entire area. Her impact on history must be seen as a part of this quilt of women’s experiences during the Civil War. Not only did she save the life of the man whom Lee held in the highest esteem, saying: “I only wish I had a hundred like him,”<sup>32</sup> but her character and integrity guided her actions throughout her life. As Union Army Captain Willard Glazier recorded in his memoirs in 1873: “She (Laura) was an active and a cunning rebel.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Archaeology**

Two archaeological surveys have been conducted on the property. The first survey was conducted in 1985 by Fairfax County Archaeologist A. Heintzelman in a 600 x 225 foot area around the house and related outbuildings. Surface survey yielded farming implements, horse accoutrements, scissors, iron hinges and nails, glass bottle fragments, sherds of porcelain, and other artifacts dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup>

A second archaeological survey was done in 2001 by Thunderbird Archaeology. This Phase I archaeological investigation yielded late 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century artifacts including whiteware and

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ironstone sherds, soda/lime windowpane shards, glass bottle fragments, cut nails (post 1790), and bones.

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Further investigations could yield information about the pre-existing addition to the north end of the main house and other previous buildings on the site as well as additional information on material culture related to the domestic and agricultural life of the property.

**END NOTES**

1. Jeanne Rust, "Portrait of Laura," *Virginia Calvacade*, Volume 12, No. 3, 34.
2. Fairfax County Deed Book K-4:57.
3. Fairfax County Deed Book K-4:203, 205.
4. Fairfax County Deed Book K-4:205.
5. Fairfax County Will Book D-2:16.
6. Hopkins Map, 1878, Portion of Dranesville District, Fairfax County, Virginia.
7. *Washington Post*, "Licensed to Wed", December 5, 1890.
8. *Fairfax Herald*, "Mrs. Laura Hanna Dead," 10 August 1923.
9. Fairfax County Will Book 10:224.
10. Fairfax County Deed Books: W-12:523; K-9:343; F-12:413; L-13:553; K-14:358; 434: 87; 666:227.
11. Fairfax County Deed Book: 3472:656.
12. Edward Trexler, *Endowed by the Creator: Families of Fairfax Courthouse, Virginia* (Fairfax, Virginia: James River Valley Publishing Company, 2003), 247-250.
13. <http://wc.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=DESC&db=hom42&id&114356;>  
[http://wc.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=hom42&id+141369.](http://wc.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=hom42&id+141369)
14. Rust, 34.
15. U. S. Censuses 1860-1880; in the 1860 census Laura is 23; in the 1870 census Laura is 32; in the 1880 census Laura is 36.

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16. Trexler, 247-250. The spouses' names Coleman listed in Trexler's genealogy of the Ratcliffe family are the same individuals named as siblings in Coleman deeds, particularly Fairfax County Deed Book H-3:444-447, concerning division of the land holdings of the late Dr. Richard Coleman as a result of a chancery suit of Charles Turley and wife vs. R. Coleman. Fairfax County Will Book R-1:1.
17. Fairfax County Deed Z-2:218-220. According to county records, this 300 1/w acre tract was part of the estate of Dr. William S. Belt, who died about 1827. To settle the Belt estate at that time, the land was offered at auction, and the winning bidder was Martin Bronaugh. Martin Bronaugh died; however, before he could close the purchase, and Sally Bronaugh, his widow purchased it at a second auction that followed, the second sale occurring about 1829. The sale is listed as being from Robert Ratcliffe to Sally Bronaugh. Robert Ratcliffe, an uncle of Laura Ratcliffe's, was a surveyor and was serving as commissioner at the time. Some county records for these transactions were in deed books that have been missing for many years, but are reflected in the county's deed book indices for 1827-1829. Sally Bronaugh held the tract until 1868, when she sold it to the Hanna heirs. The county records do not reflect any taxable buildings being on the land during Sally Bronaugh's ownership, although William Belt had paid taxes on buildings on this tract in 1820. Although these transactions refer to land that abuts the Laura Ratcliffe House, information from the Belt and Bronaugh deeds could explain some gaps in the record about the complicated Coleman transactions for the Laura Ratcliffe House property.
18. Richard J. Coleman had a sister named Ann Maria Coleman Ratcliffe, wife of Charles Ratcliffe, who died in 1835. Ann Maria Coleman Ratcliffe (not to be confused with Ann McCarty Lee Ratcliffe, Laura's mother) had inherited hundreds of acres from Dr. Richard Coleman's estate, but then relocated to Christian County, Kentucky, in 1844 and attempted to sell her Fairfax County land through an agent. The land was divided into several large tracts. Some of the initial buyers were ultimately unable to pay the prices they had agreed upon, and as a result, there are numerous deeds and other records on-file reflecting attempted sales, foreclosures, dissolution of the agreement Mrs. Ratcliffe had with the agent, and so forth. Some reflect legal actions taken in courts in Kentucky. These tracts are near the Laura Ratcliffe House and Richard Coleman farm, but do not include any land related directly to the Laura Ratcliffe House. Trexler, 247-250.
19. Fairfax County Deed Book U-3:43.
20. Beth Mitchell, *Beginning at a White Oak: Patents and Northern Neck Grants of Fairfax County, Virginia* (Fairfax County, Virginia: Office of Comprehensive Planning, 1977). The 150 acres was a Northern Neck Grant issued to Jonathan Davis on 19 January 1778, NNI:310.
21. Rust, 34.

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22. Major John Scott, "Mosby Saved by an Angel," *Partisan Life with Col. John S. Mosby* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1867), 29-31; John S. Mosby, *Mosby's War Reminiscences and Stuart's Cavalry Campaigns* (Boston: George A. Jones & Co., 1887), 65 and 66.
23. Hugh C. Keen and Horace Mewborn, *43<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Virginia Cavalry Mosby's Command* (Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, 1993), 20, 26.
24. Bakeless, John. *Spies of the Confederacy* (New York, New York: J. B. Lippincott Company). 1970.
25. J. E. B. Stuart, "*To Laura*", Included in an Album presented to Miss Laura Ratcliffe by J.E.B. Stuart, 1963. The Album is currently in private hands.
26. Rust, 38.
27. Ibid., 34-37.
28. Ibid., 39. Interview of Gladys Utterback by Winifred Meiselman, 1984.
29. Fairfax County Deed Book V-6:685.
30. Trexler.
31. Meiselman, Interview with Gladys Utterback.
32. Scott, "The Raid on Chantilly", 62.
33. Glazier, Willard, *Three Years in the Federal Cavalry* (New York, New York: R. H. Ferguson and Company, 1873), 148-149.
34. Virginia Department of Historic Resources, Archaeological Survey File 44FX0903, Richmond, Virginia.

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**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**Verbal Boundary Justification**

The boundary is shown on the accompanying map entitled "Merrybrook, Fairfax County" noted as map 016-3-((1))-5A that was compiled by the Patton Harris Rust and Associates PC, an engineering company in Fairfax County. The current boundary of the Merrybrook property is outlined on the map with a thick dark line and includes approximately 1 acre (0.99953).

**Boundary Justification**

The boundary includes the approximate 1 acre outlined with the heavy black line on the map entitled Title Report, Parcel 5 (016-3-((1))-5A for Merrybrook, Fairfax County, Virginia. This approximate 1 acre parcel (0.99953) includes the farmhouse and secondary resources that have been historically associated with the property from circa 1820 to circa 1950.

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**All photographs are common to the following:**

**Merrybrook, Fairfax County, Virginia, #029-0245**

**PHOTOGRAPHER: Nancy Olds**

**DATE: November 11, 2006**

**NEGATIVE: 23194**

**LOCATION OF NEGATIVES: Virginia Department of Historic Resources in Richmond, Virginia**

Photo 1 of 10, frame 5

Front approach, east side, looking north

Photo 2 of 10, frame 3

Well and oldest section, showing gabled roofs, looking south

Photo 3 of 10, frame 10

Barn, front view showing cupola, looking south

Photo 4 of 10, frame 2

Tool shed, formerly servant's quarters, looking north

Photo 5 of 10, frame 15

Dining room showing beaded wall enclosing boxed stairs and two oldest doors in the house, looking south

Photo 6 of 10, frame 20

Entrance to dining room showing remains of original wide board floor

Photo 7 of 10, frame 17

Kitchen ceiling looking west

Photo 8 of 10, frame 35

Walnut newel post at foot of 1850s stair looking west

Photo 9 of 10, frame 32

Exposed log beams in 1850s bedroom looking east

Photo 10 of 10, frame 21

Oldest bedroom looking north

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